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“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be”: Narratives of promotions in elite professional careers

Stefanie Gustafsson

Email: s.gustafsson@bath.ac.uk
School of Management
University of Bath
Claverton Down
BA2 7AY
Bath, UK

Juani Swart

Email: mnsjas@bath.ac.uk
School of Management
University of Bath

Abstract

How do organizational decision-makers and promotion candidates experience promotions in elite professional careers? Despite literature recognizing that promotions are important career events for organizations and individuals, this question has received little scholarly attention. Drawing on a narrative approach and combining spoken and visual accounts, this article examines how organizational decision-makers and promotion candidates experience the promotion to partnership in law firms. Our study reveals four narratives which illustrate important differences and similarities in their accounts. In the *official script*, organizational decision-makers uniformly recounted promotions in a detached way, emphasizing objective meanings of career success. In contrast, promotion candidates’ accounts were varied ranging from joy and anticipation in *walk in the park*, to anger and frustration in *dark art* to anxiety and ambivalence in *bittersweet* narratives. The study makes three contributions to the literature on promotions. First, we develop an emotion-based understanding of promotions suggesting that promotions are constructed through people’s lived emotional experiences which inform their meaning making of the new role. Second, we argue that promotions are not always positive

career events, but potentially contradictory and negative. Third, we contribute to extant research on promotions which has favoured quantitative methodologies by adopting a multi-modal approach.

Keywords: Promotion, careers, emotions, professional organizations, lawyers, visual methods, narrative

Introduction

At one point in their career, most employees experience being promoted to a new role. Promotions inform individuals' career sensemaking (Dany, Louvel, & Valette, 2011; Ibarra, 1999) and they are powerful organizational tools used to motivate and retain employees (Baruch, 2004; Gowler & Legge, 1989). Promotions are also significant because they are limited in number, while decisions about who will get promoted are dichotomous (Beehr, Nair, & Gudanowski, 2004). Hence, not every employee who feels deserving of a promotion will be successful, making this an important and intriguing career event to investigate.

There is an evolving body of research on promotions at both organizational and individual level. Previous research has, for example, focused on how employees assess organizational promotion criteria (Beehr et al., 2004; Webster & Beehr, 2013), specifically the extent to which promotion decisions are judged as fair and just (Garcia-Izquierdo, Moscoso, & Ramos-Villagrasa, 2012; Kaplan & Ferris, 2006). Other bodies of research have focused on desired promotion outcomes, specifically individuals' perceptions of career success (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Heslin, 2005), and promotion strategies and behaviours (King, 2004; Sturges, 2008). Finally, studies have considered the identity change associated with promotions as important career transitions (Ibarra, 1999; Nicholson, 1984, Wittman, 2018). However, while there is considerable knowledge about what promotion processes *should* be or feel like but little understanding of *how they are experienced* by the people enacting them. Attending to people's subjective experiences of promotions is important

because it can provide insight into the underlying complexities of promotion processes which have been acknowledged, but not sufficiently explored (e.g. Peter & Hull, 1969; see also Romaine, 2014).

To contribute to existing understanding, we draw on a narrative approach (Czarniawska, 1999; Rhodes & Brown, 2005) and conceptualize promotions as critical narrative incidents (Czarniawska, 2004; Flanagan, 1954). Studying the stories of both promotion decision-makers and candidates, we gain insight into the felt experiences and subjective meanings they associate with promotions. In doing so, we build on Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010), who argue that we need to know more about the stories individuals tell of important career transitions. We further complement promotion candidates' spoken narratives with drawings they created of this critical career event. Visual methods allow for subjective experiences and feelings to be expressed outside the boundaries of language (Barry, 1994; Dewey, 1934; Leavy, 2018). While drawings enable a dynamic representation of reality that recognizes the ambiguities of human experiences (Langer, 1953; 1957).

We empirically examine narratives of promotions in an elite professional career, specifically promotions to partnership in law firms. Many lawyers aim to become partners (Gustafsson, Swart, & Kinnie, 2018; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Morris & Pinnington, 1998). While decisions regarding who gets promoted are important because they have strategic relevance for law firms (Empson, 2007; Greenwood & Empson, 2003). However to date, the promotion process remains opaque and poorly understood (Wilkins & Gulati, 1996). Hence, profession scholars have emphasized the need for more in-depth research into professionals' experience of promotion systems (Morris & Pinnington, 1998).

Our study makes several contributions. First, while promotions have attracted considerable scholarly interest, little research has examined the emotional experiences and subjective meanings associated with promotions. To develop extant literature, we draw on a narrative

approach and propose an emotion-based understanding of promotions. Second, prior research has largely presented promotions as positive and unambiguous career events. In contrast, we highlight the potentially negative and contradictory realities of promotions that arise as promotions are situated in socio-emotional contexts. Third, promotion research has mainly adopted quantitative methodologies. We contribute to extant research by adopting a multi-modal approach combining spoken and visual narratives, illustrating how these enable new meanings to be generated beyond language alone.

Promotions, promoting, and getting promoted

Research into promotions has drawn on two different perspectives. At the organizational level, promotions are generally conceptualized as systems and processes (Allen, 1997; Ferris, Buckley, & Allen, 1992; Baruch, 2015; Sonnenfeld & Peiperl, 1988). Informed by a resource-based view (Boxall, 1996) and human capital theory (Becker, 1964), of primary concern is how promotions can be designed most effectively to “identify and control the mobility of individuals through an organization” (Ferris et al., 1992:47). This perspective is generally taken by human resource management (HRM) scholars who see promotions as part of a strategic toolkit that managers use to create firm-specific human capital (Ployhart, Van Iddekinge, & MacKenzie, 2011) and to enable sustained organizational performance (Campbell, Coff, & Kryscynski, 2012). Frequently, the primary objective is to create a fit between organizations and individuals (Kooij & Boon, 2018; Takeuchi, Lepak, & Swart, 2011) by matching individual career aspirations to organizational aims (Inkson & King, 2011). This is based on the assumption that promotion systems reflect an objective and rational reality. In professional organizations such as law, accounting and consulting firms (Malhotra, Morris, & Smets, 2010; Morris & Pinnington, 1998) promotion systems generally follow an explicit competition logic, where employees are put in ‘races’ against each other (Van Maanen, 1977) and compete in ‘tournaments’ (Rosenbaum, 1979). These are supported by carefully designed promotion

rituals (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) that enable the socialization of early career professionals (Grey, 1994). Thus, from an organizational perspective, the antecedents, strategic design principles and organizational outcomes of promotions are core concerns. As such, it rarely advances understanding of how the people who enact these systems experience them.

Research investigating promotions at the individual level has converged around three assumptions. First, scholars have suggested that individuals are rational and strategic career actors who engage in career self-management to get promoted (King, 2004; Jung & Takeuchi, 2018; Sturges, Conway, & Liefoghe, 2010). Typically, career self-management, defined by King (2004:119) as the *“range of behaviors that is intended to prevail upon the decisions made by those gatekeepers who are in a position to influence their desired career outcomes”*, assumes that individuals influence decision-makers through networking (Seibert, Kraimer & Liden, 2001), visibility management (Sturges, 2008) and investment in their career capital (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). This is particularly the case for professionals, who are frequently presented as ‘career game players’ concerned with enacting career strategies to “perform and progress” in their organization (Tomlinson et al., 2013:259). However, by emphasizing individual rationality and instrumentality, this research ignores the felt experiences associated with important career events (Kidd, 1998), and thus only provides a partial account of promotions. Further, these studies generally build on the new career discourse, such as the protean or the intelligent career, emphasizing individual career agency (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 2004). As such, they ignore that career making is bounded by and situated in social contexts (Inkson et al., 2012; Tams & Arthur, 2010; Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2016). This is particularly relevant for elite professional careers where extensive socialization processes shape individuals’ careers over time (Anderson-Gough, Grey & Robson, 2000; Cohen, 1999; Rosenbaum, 1979).

Second, this research generally conceptualizes promotions as positive career events, ignoring the contradictions and ambiguities inherent to careers (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; El-Sawad, Arnold, & Cohen, 2004). From this perspective, promotions are indicators of career success linked to positive career evaluations (Arthur et al., 2005; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Heslin, 2005). This view is particularly prevalent in law firms, where partnership is viewed as the pinnacle of career success and presented as the aspirational ideal for lawyers (Empson, 2007; Gustafsson et al., 2018). To date, little research has challenged this positive perspective of promotions (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; El-Sawad et al., 2004). One exception is Baruch and Vardi (2016), who suggest that contemporary careers are made up of both promise and disillusionment. However, questions such as “Is being promoted the fulfilment of a long-held career dream?” or “How do people perceive the reality of their new role?” have not yet been answered.

Third, promotions are argued to be periods of transition as people change their roles, employment status and work content (Ashforth, 2001; Louis, 1980; Nicholson, 1984). Research has particularly emphasized people’s changing identity projects in this context (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra, 1999). Possible future selves, or whom they might become when promoted, guide employees in these transitions (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Particularly relevant to our study is Ibarra’s (1999) paper on the role transitions of young professionals. Investigating the career narratives of consultants and investment bankers, she illustrates how early career professionals adapt to senior roles through observation, experimentation, and evaluation while continuously working on their ‘provisional selves’ as they move up the ladder. However, as the focus was *what* people did as they worked on their transitions, *how* they felt about these transitions received less attention. Further, more recently, Wittman (2018) has argued that role changes such as promotions may not actually lead to identity change when identities are

maintained or ‘linger’ on. Thus, studying people’s narratives allows us to potentially uncover the experiences of those whose “role change has not changed them” (Wittman, 2018:38).

Finally, methodologically, research on promotions has mainly used quantitative approaches such as large-scale surveys (e.g. Beehr et al., 2004; Garcia-Izquierdo et al., 2012; Kaplan & Ferris, 2006; Webster & Beehr, 2013). For example, using a survey methodology, participants were asked to assess the extent to which they perceive that promotions are given to those who are most deserving (Beehr et al., 2004). As such, qualitative inquiries focusing on people’s constructions of promotion processes are still rare. One exception is Dany et al.’s (2011) study of academic promotions. Drawing on the concept of the promotion script, they found that academics interpret promotion rules by constructing different scripts that they perceive to be credible, legible, and legitimate. However, as they focused on people’s interpretations of existing promotion rules, they paid less attention to the subjective meanings people attribute to being promoted.

In summary, research has contributed to our understanding of promotions in important ways. However, the question of: *How do organizational decision-makers and promotion candidates experience promotions in elite professional careers?* is still unanswered. To investigate this question, we adopt a narrative approach.

Narratives of promotions

A narrative approach suggests that people make sense of their experiences through narration (Bruner, 1991; Czarniawska, 2004; Rhodes & Brown, 2015; Sims, 2003). By telling their stories, individuals interpret events and bestow them with - or, at times, relieve them of - meaning. Through narration, meanings are created, negotiated and renegotiated (Bruner, 1991), and multiple realities can emerge. These realities are often emotionally infused: when narrating an event, individuals express emotions that they experienced, while the telling of the story itself may evoke complex emotions (Ellis, 1991; Fineman, 2004). Similarly, narratives can be

important coping resources when people experience challenging work events (Gabriel, Gray, & Goregaokar, 2010).

Narratives have also been used in career studies (Bujold, 2004). For example, Cochran (1990) argues that by telling their career story, people make sense of career decisions, construct meanings of success, and work through failure. In short, they connect the dots as they reflect on the past and chart their future career path (Polkinghorne, 1988). Further, by conceptualizing career identity as narrative practice, LaPointe (2010) points to the importance of the social context in shaping people's career stories (see also Lee et al., 2011). However, by favouring the perspective of the individual narrator, a narrative approach also gives room to narrative agency as people author their own versions of events (Czarniawska, 2004). For example, Fraher and Gabriel (2014) reveal how the shared dream of flying shapes pilots' career narratives in different ways. Additionally, Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) propose that narratives are particularly prevalent in high-stakes work transitions, such as the promotion to partnership examined in this study.

Drawing the promotional journey

To elucidate people's experiences of being promoted, we combine their stories with drawings they created of their journeys to promotion. Participant drawings are an arts-based method and a form of visual methodology (Bell, Warren, & Schroeder, 2014; Leavy, 2018) that proposes that language is a limited form of expression and that the arts can create and communicate meaning that goes beyond what language alone can express (Barone & Eisner, 2012). The relationship between language and the arts has been explored by scholars such as Dewey (1934), Langer (1951), and Cassirer (1944). Artistic expression conveys the subjective experiences that make up human feelings and the ambiguities of our inner lives (Langer, 1953, 1957). According to Langer, as language is limited in its logical form; it alone cannot describe feelings. Moreover, when feelings are symbolized through art, such as through drawing,

subjective experiences can be expressed and understood (Langer, 1953, 1957). Art thus allows expression of ups and downs, disappointments and triumphs, and sorrows and successes - in other words, the dynamic forms that constitute careers. Finally, according to Cassirer (1944:143), “language and science are abbreviations of reality; art is an intensification of reality.” Thus, while language reduces reality through classification and simplification, the arts enable the discovery of new realities.

In management and organization studies, visual methods are increasingly common (Leavy, 2018; Meyer et al., 2013; Vince & Broussine, 1996). Zuboff (1988) was one of the earliest scholars to use participant drawings. His study on clerical workers explored participants’ feelings about their jobs before and after the installation of a new computer system. Meyer’s (1991) subsequent paper brought drawings into organizational research, acknowledging the role of visual methods in building theory that focuses on people’s experiences. In career research, Mazzetti and Blenkinsopp (2012) later used a visual timeline method to explore the stress participants associated with career transitions. They argued that a visual approach presents insights into the “complexity of life as it is lived by the individuals involved” (Mazzetti & Blenkinsopp, 2012:658) and expresses career contradictions. Thus, an arts-based lens can provide insights into the felt experiences of critical career events and their underlying ambiguities.

Research methods

To elicit people’s experiences of promotions, we use the critical incident technique (CIT) and conceptualize promotion as a critical narrative incident (Flanagan, 1954), following Czarniawska’s (2004) suggestion that CIT is a suitable method to collect people’s narratives. Specifically, we draw on Chell’s (2004:48) definition of CIT as “a qualitative interview procedure, which facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences, identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects.” CIT

focuses on four elements: the individual's description of the incident, the individual's interpretation of and feelings associated with the incident, actions taken by the individual, and outcomes as a result of the incident. By doing so, it places the respondent at the forefront of the inquiry and allows for a specific event to be understood in depth.

Data collection

Our findings draw on qualitative data on promotions to partnership in seven UK law firms. The legal sector varies in terms of firm size and practice areas. To represent this variety and provide an accurate representation of the sector, participating firms were purposefully selected to represent different sizes and practice areas, including litigation, intellectual property, and taxation (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Access to the organizations was established through a senior partner or HR manager who assisted in the selection of participants.

Our study was multimodal in that we collected and analysed two forms of empirical evidence: interview transcripts (capturing the spoken word) and drawings (capturing the visual artefact) (Greenwood, Jack, & Haylock, 2018; Meyer et al., 2013). The first author interviewed 15 promotion decision-makers (partners and HR managers), with interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, and 22 lawyers on the promotion to partnership (10 were female), with interviews lasting between one and two hours. With some participants, an additional follow-up interview was scheduled three to four months after promotion (13). We then introduced the drawing activity to promotion candidates, asking them, "Can you please draw how you experienced your promotion to partnership?" Out of awareness that being asked to draw might cause anxiety and concern about their artistic ability (Kearney & Hyle, 2004), we explained the use and purpose of visual methods in the context of this study. We also emphasized that the exercise was voluntary and not a judgment of artistic ability. Two lawyers decided not to draw, while the majority were intrigued and positively engaged. We still included the transcripts of these two lawyers because they were valuable verbal accounts.

In total, 37 people participated in this study, and 50 interviews were conducted, which were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Our study was situated in a homogeneous context but drew on heterogeneous populations (lawyers and HR managers); hence, the sample size was appropriate (Creswell, 2007). Further, in line with other studies, we reached data saturation about two-thirds of the way into our study - that is, after interviewing 10 promotion decision-makers and 14 lawyers (see Saunders & Townsend, 2016, for a comprehensive review on saturation).

Data analysis

We adopted an ‘intermediary position’ combining a rigorous and transparent analytical process that was sensitive to the theoretical setting of our study (Greenwood et al. 2018). Following Greenwood et al. (2018), who propose that multimodal researchers need to adapt “*methodology to suit their needs*” while “*remaining close to the specificities of their own reflexive and empirical context*” (p. 25). We also developed an analytical toolkit consisting of different elements. First, building on Rose (2016), we constructed three analytical sites where meanings were constructed: the *site of the artefact*, containing both spoken and visual empirical evidence; the *site of audiencing*, describing conversations with participants to capture their interpretation of the drawing; and the *site of integration*, where we combined findings from the previous analysis. We summarize these points of analytical inquiry in Table 1.

-- Insert Table 1 about here --

Site of the artefact: Here, the first author initially familiarized herself with the written interview transcripts by repeatedly reading each transcript. During the data collection, the lawyers were forthcoming and articulate in their accounts. In line with narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993), particular attention was paid to the assembly and sequence of critical events surrounding promotion, the role others played in the stories, and how lawyers constructed themselves as protagonists when telling their stories. We were also aware that the “*emotionality*

of narrative is more than the location of certain emotion words and phrases” but “*includes the relationship between words, the metaphors used*” (Fineman, 2004:733). While the emotional form mattered, the context did, too. For example, the meaning of promotion became entangled with other life strands (Lee et al., 2011). We subsequently coded these, as well. As a final step, we produced a summative narrative for each participant that, together with our emerging coding scheme, provided the basis for discussions among the author team.

In the second step, we focused our analysis on the participants’ drawings. Inspired by Rose (2016), we initially took note of the first impressions that we perceived in these images. For example, Rachel’s image conveyed movement and dynamism. We then focused on the content and composition of each drawing in an inductive manner (Greenwood et al., 2018); in other words, we broadly coded what the images showed and how the different composites represented in the image related to each other. Again, using Rachel’s example, codes included “line,” “arrow,” “hurdles,” “wrapped gift,” and so forth. We then started to work abductively and focused our analysis on the semiotics, or the “*signs that are used in producing, conveying, and interpreting messages and the codes that govern their use*” (Moriarty, 2011:227). According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), signs comprise two parts: the signifier, or the composite itself, and the signified, or the concept it represents. Central to semiotic analysis is the idea of representation in determining meaning or how a certain signifier epitomizes a signified. To understand the relationship between signifier and signified, one can distinguish between iconic (relatively obvious derivative resemblance), indexial (indicating the existence of something), and symbolic representations (conventionalized representations, such as a young child representing the future) (Peirce, 1931). Given our interest in the felt experiences of promotions, we paid particular attention to the emotions represented (Langer, 1953, 1957). As a final step, we developed a range of codes informed by the analysis and created a summary for each drawing to ensure that all analytical elements were captured.

Site of audiencing: The researcher as the interpreter plays an important role in attributing meaning to signs. However, when people create art, they choose between what they feel is important and what is not. Hence, to strengthen our interpretations and to facilitate analytical reflexivity, we asked participants to reflect on their drawings and shared our interpretations with them. As a result of these conversations, we emphasized some interpretations over others. For instance, Margaret revealed that her drawing symbolized a lack of control over her promotion, as the decision was made by others who would open the door for her. As a result of these conversations, we revised our coding scheme.

Site of integration: As a last step, we integrated the codes for each form of empirical material. In doing so, we followed a dialogical approach, recognizing that text and visual elements are interconnected and shape each other (Meyer et al., 2013). We looked for thematic patterns and relationships between these codes to discern core narratives (Riessman, 1993) and discussed them among the author team. On the basis of these discussions, we further clarified the boundaries of each narrative and identified four narratives, each illustrating different meanings of being promoted and illustrating a range of emotional experiences. We present these in the following section, supported by empirical evidence.

Findings

All respondents described the promotion to partnership as an important event in a professional's career. What became evident was that despite the fairly unified symbolic meaning ascribed to the partner title, our interviewees experienced the promotion process differently. Overall, we identified four narratives distinguishing between organizational decision-makers (including partners and HR professionals) and promotion candidates. For instance, *promotion as an official script* describes the narratives of decision-makers, which depict promotions as a rational and objective process. We then differentiated between three narratives recounted by promotion candidates. *Promotion as a walk in the park* describes being

promoted as a positive experience with few challenges, as respondents portrayed themselves in control of their careers. Next, *promotion as a dark art* paints a different picture, as respondents felt frustrated and angered by political power plays and secrecy underpinning the process. Finally, *promotion as bittersweet* describes promotions as periods characterized by anxiety and uncertainty because participants feared that they could not live up to the ideal partner image.

Promotion as official script

A central feature of this narrative was its unemotional and detached recounting of promotions. These respondents described the promotion process as objective, transparent and clearly structured. Organizational decision-makers frequently emphasized the steps and stages underpinning promotions, such as preparing an application document, writing a business case, the promotion committee interview and the final partnership vote. For example, Harry, a managing partner, explained the interview process in his firm as follows:

We have an interview process for new partners who we're promoting so that candidates who have made an application and have been endorsed by their team manager, team leader, and managing director of their division are then interviewed for suitability by at least three of the board members. The results of the interview process are considered at a board meeting, and decisions made reflect the criteria and their suitability.

According to partners and HR professionals, promotion decisions were made based on 'the merits of each case'. In other words, a partner needed to satisfy a set of pre-defined criteria such as technical ability, leadership and people management. These were described in promotion frameworks that were available to all candidates. Many respondents also emphasized the importance of strategic fit between a candidate and the firm. Chris, an HR professional, explained:

We've got a strategy which says we have a strategic need for more partners in this area, and some will be from internal promotion, and others will be from lateral hire. [...] It's a question of whether that individual meets the criteria.

The firm's strategy and financial consideration were important reference points in decision-makers' sensemaking of promotion candidates. For example, Carl, a senior partner, reflected on Mary's case who was one of the promotional candidates. He suggested that although she performed well in some areas, the financial grounding for her promotion was debatable, leading him to feel uncertain about her prospects:

With Mary, technically and relationship-wise, she should be absolutely fine. The only issue that we have there is that she is in a team that has already got three partners in it. And there is that slight sense of 'Is it right that we should put another partner into the team?'

Importantly, decision-makers had a positive view of their role in providing support and guidance. Specifically HR professionals described the purpose of the process in providing transparency and objectivity. They suggested that it gave 'reassurance' to partners that candidates who were 'partnership material' were differentiated from those who were not—or, as frequently described, were 'weeded out'.

Further, for these participants, the meaning of promotion was uncontested: it symbolized career success, achievement and desirable career benefits such as professional status and income. Lynette and Chris, two HR professionals, described this as follows:

I think people really value becoming a partner. It's really important. Obviously, you [have] got the benefits, the ownership. I think if you're a lawyer, having that title of partner which is kind of like [saying] you've made it, you're a partner. (Lynette, HR professional)

I think it's recognition – it's achievement of a career grade. I can say that I've made it to partner. I've proved my worth. (Chris, HR professional)

In sum, official script narratives were consistent with dominant understandings of promotions as rational and objective (Allen, 1997; Ployhart et al., 2011). The narrators presented themselves as business-focused and supportive, while the purpose of the promotion process was to identify suitable candidates who contributed strategically to the firm. Promotions were described as desirable career events, the career climax in the professional hierarchy.

Promotion as a walk in the park

In contrast, promotion candidates' narratives were more varied. In narratives of promotion as walk in the park, lawyers described their promotion experiences as overall positive. For these respondents, the official HR process was a necessity that needed to be overcome but that did not pose any serious challenges. Rachel, a confident young lawyer who was promoted to partner early in her career, illustrated the official promotion process as effortless hurdle jumping, *"I felt in terms of the process, I was able to just leapfrog over those hurdles to get the prize of partnership."*

-- Drawing 1 about here --

Rachel also illustrated partnership as a gift, which indicates that she considered it to have been handed to her easily. This was confirmed in her interview, when she reflected as follows:

Out of the blue, they said, 'We'll make you a partner.' That was it. That was my process. It was literally overnight. They said, 'We'll make you equity partner. We give you this bonus. We give you this salary. What do you say?' I said, 'Yes'.

Rachel's story had similarities to Kate's. A confident London lawyer, Kate also talked about her promotion as straightforward and uncomplicated. In her drawing, she visualized her experience with a large, green tick and suggested:

This isn't meant to sound arrogant, but I didn't actually find the process of being made partner difficult [...] I found it quite easy to go through the process. It seemed to go smoothly.

-- Drawing 2 about here --

While she acknowledged that there was some uncertainty given the competition with other candidates, she was confident. She attributed this to her 'unique selling point' or 'USP'—her ability to develop relationships with clients and generate new business:

That's my USP that I am being put forward on in relation to, I can generate business. There are five or six people in my department that are more qualified by up to five years, and they are not being put forward because the thing that for me has been singled out is that I can business develop.

Another feature of the walk in the park narrative was its positive description of others. For example, Kate talked about her mentor's support of doing the "ground work in terms of drafting the papers". Similarly, Frank, who was promoted "relatively quickly" in his career, spoke extensively about how senior partners whom he "admired a lot" and had "great respect for" had "nurtured" him over the years. He also ascribed a particularly important role to his current Chief Executive, who had "identified" him as a suitable candidate.

Importantly, even though others had shaped their careers, these lawyers did not describe their promotion success as dependent on them. Rather, they talked about how they had actively influenced important gatekeepers. For example, Frank arranged meetings with senior partners to ensure their support in the partnership vote:

I wanted to guard the support of senior members of the team so that there would be no concern. So I had a number of meetings with people and explained what was being proposed.

Similarly, Kate suggested that she influenced others prior to the process, “*I’d made noise about partnership.*” Rachel also talked about the importance of proactive influence. In the following, she recounted an incident where she expressed her dissatisfaction to a senior partner, which became a critical event leading to her promotion:

One day, he spoke to me in his office about salary reviews. I was quite shocked by what he'd offered, and I made it quite clear that I was very unhappy. [...] I was annoyed, and he knew I was annoyed, and then the next day another partner came in because he had told him about our conversation. I think they had assumed I was planning to leave.

Lawyers such as Rachel, Kate and Frank valued their new role and felt optimistic about their careers following promotion. They spoke with anticipation about their next career steps. For example, Frank suggested that partnership would help him achieve financial security and “*consolidate*” over the next 10 years. Meanwhile, Kate talked about how being a partner would help her to develop more business in the future. “*I’ve got business generation ideas. So just try and do the thing that I was made up to do, which is bring work in.*” Further, Rachel’s drawing shows her jumping out of the picture to whatever comes next in her career. She said:

Now I’ve got it. What can I do with it? What difference is it going to make for me? What does it enable me to do? How can I use it as a tool for me to achieve other goals and targets?

Thus, these narratives present the promotion to partnership as positive, while protagonists talked about themselves as in control of their career journey, proactively gaining the support of partners internally and clients externally. Following promotion, respondents embraced this next career phase and felt optimistic about their new role.

Promotion as a dark art

In contrast, several of our respondents talked about how the promotion process had invoked feelings of frustration, contempt and even anger due to secrecy and political play underpinning

promotions. One was Margaret, a young city lawyer, who described herself as a dedicated worker who would frequently miss events with family and friends to be at work. Prior to being considered for partnership, she enjoyed steady career progression. However, when reaching the point in her career where she was considered for promotion, she began to feel “*in the dark*” about what was going on:

It's a closed book, and the whole point is that you have to figure out what you can offer, speak to other people in other firms, and figure it out for yourself. But, no, nobody comes and says, here are the criteria, no. [...] I tried to ask one of the partners, and I was told, 'If you have to ask the question, you're not ready for partnership'.

Visualizing her promotion experiences, she drew a set of stairs leading up to a closed door. The door symbolized her transition from senior associate to partner, where she found herself unsupported by the people who decided on her future:

I have drawn steps leading up to a door, which is a bit random, but it was the first thing that came into my mind, and I suppose I feel like it's this quite [a] clear progression, and then, at a certain point, someone opens this door and says, 'Come in', but you have to be sort of let in [...] The fact [is] that it is all a bit unknown. You don't really know what happens behind the door.

-- Drawing 3 about here --

Matthew, a lawyer in a medium-sized regional firm, also expressed concern about not having sufficient support. In his drawing, he drew footsteps and a ladder leading up to the sky, which symbolized his promotional journey, and a scroll, which symbolized partnership. At the time of the interview, he was not yet sure of the outcome of the promotion decision; hence, it is placed in brackets.

-- Drawing 4 about here --

An important feature of Matthew's drawing is the two sets of footsteps walking alongside each other until the beginning of the promotion process, symbolizing himself and existing partners. His firm had recently moved from an informal to a more formulaic approach. Matthew struggled with this shift from feeling supported to having to prove himself, reflecting as follows:

This is me going all the way up, and this is the firm. There has been support where I needed it. The firm have wandered along with me. They are still with me, but they are not there. There is a gap here around the change of the process. It has made it feel more like me having to prove something. [...] So it feels more of a potential stumbling block than an opportunity.

Importantly, while both Margaret and Matthew drew clearly structured climbing frames, the lack of a railing in Margaret's drawing and footsteps next to the ladder rungs in Matthew's drawing also points to the unmanaged and potentially dangerous dimension of professional career structures.

Another lawyer who experienced a challenging time was James. His career differed from Rachel's and Matthew's in that he had changed firms and professions, working as a lawyer and in business. In his interview, James was very vocal about the difficulties of getting promoted. His first attempt had been unsuccessful as his application was turned down by existing partners at the final interview stage:

My personal feeling of the process is that it is incredibly flawed that you have a candidate that goes through, that has been supported by the business and has got glowing feedback from clients as well as from within the business from everyone that has interacted with him, that goes through a process, a formal process as part of HR partnership promotion through all the different hurdles, and it's all going fine, and it comes down to one final interview at the end of it all where six people sit around the

table who have never met me, who know nothing about my business, and I performed badly on the day that [they] then decided actually we are going to turn this chap down. Now that to me seems to be completely wrong.

Following this event, he contemplated changing firms, but he decided to try again the next year and got promoted.

James attributed his successful promotion to having persevered in light of the challenges he faced: *“In terms of what makes you get to partnership, one, you never give up.”* Matthew also tried to rationalize his irritation and concluded that he would have faced similar challenges in other firms. Margaret appeared to be the most reflective. Coming to the conclusion that partnership *“is all a bit unknown”*, she realized that career progression is not as clear and straightforward as she had assumed throughout her career: *“It’s only through time that you start to appreciate that lots of people don’t become partners.”*

Importantly, given their struggles, these participants perceived that the role of partner had a deeper meaning. For example, it allowed James to consolidate his business and professional aspirations:

It’s a desire to create a business because ultimately, part of the reason why I left was [that I was] always looking to get into business. I am interested in business, and this stuff that I am doing now is setting up new business.

The deeper significance of partnership was also evident in the drawings. While Margaret suggested, *“It’s like a stairway into heaven”*, Matthew proposed, *“It was almost like one of those Monty Python films where there is a golden ladder stretching up into the clouds.”*

In sum, these narratives described the promotion to partnership as a challenging endeavour that caused feelings of frustration, irritation and anger as participants tended to see themselves as victims. However, following their successful promotion, they seemed to have overcome their negative experiences and were able to create meaning in their new role.

Promotion as bittersweet

The final narrative also describes promotion as a time of struggle. In contrast, these respondents did not talk about being annoyed or frustrated but instead recounted experiences of anxiety, exhaustion and worry. In this section, we focus on the stories of Claudia, Clara and Anna. Claudia, a female lawyer who had joined the firm seven years prior, talked about the strain she felt during the promotion process as follows:

You feel that there is a lot of scrutiny on you. [...] It's a lot of pressure when you're being scrutinized all the time. So that all comes to [a] head as you build and build. I found it an incredibly stressful process.

Clara and Anna also recounted feeling under pressure. For example, Anna talked about the “bar being very high” in terms of “ticking all the boxes” and feeling worried about not being able to work more than she already did. Clara illustrated her experience by drawing a two-sided face. On the one hand, it presents her smiling, indicating her happiness about being considered a potential partner. On the other hand, we see drops of sweat and a downturned mouth illustrating her struggle:

It's a face of exhaustion. It's an exhausting process. So that's all I can think about, a really round, exhausted face. [...] It's been tiring; it's been really tiring.

-- Drawing 5 about here --

Importantly, rather than attributing their negative experiences to others, their anxieties seemed to be rooted in perceived self-discrepancies about not being able to fulfil the ideal partner image. For example, Clara was worried that she looked too young compared to other candidates to be taken seriously by clients. Claudia was concerned that not being from the UK affected her ability to bring in a ‘big client’, while Anna struggled to work the same hours as other candidates and generate client relationships due to her dual role as mother and a lawyer.

These lawyers emphasized how they had tried to establish themselves as valid candidates by overcoming their perceived discrepancies. For example, Anna used time with her children on the local playground as a business development opportunity to attract new clients. Clara initiated client conversations over the phone so that she could establish herself as a knowledgeable lawyer without being judged by her clients based on her appearance, while Claudia talked about using her different national background to develop client relationships in a new market. All three also tried to compensate by presenting themselves as highly committed to their firms:

I couldn't be more committed. You won't get anyone more committed. (Clara)

When I'm here, I am working hard. On my days off, I do things that people may do in work time, you know, like going to the doctor. [...] I work very hard when I am here.
(Anna)

I have put a lot of heart and soul into this. (Claudia)

Importantly, while they valued the partner title per se, they felt ambivalent about their new role as they continued to worry about not fulfilling the ideal. For example, in her follow-up interview, Clara suggested that even though she was happy, she still felt anxious and exhausted:

I am pretty exhausted. And nothing has really changed as the result of partnership. If anything, there is anxiety there to make sure that you continue to be good enough. So I am pushing myself to continue to do everything perfectly as much as I can, which adds to the exhaustion.

Similarly, Anna continued to struggle to balance the time demands put on herself by her multiple roles and continued to feel scrutinized: “*Being under the microscope, that's still there. And then the time commitment; it is still a concern.*”

In sum, these narratives were stories of worry, anxiety and exhaustion, frequently associated with perceptions of personal inadequacy in comparison to the ideal partnership

candidate communicated throughout the promotion process. Even though respondents had been successfully promoted, they continued to feel that they were under pressure and scrutiny, leading them to be ambiguous about their new role.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how organizational decision-makers and promotion candidates experience promotions in elite professional careers. Drawing on a narrative, multimodal approach, we identified four promotion narratives - distinguishing between organizational decision-makers' narratives of the 'official script' and promotion candidates' narratives of promotions as 'walk in the park', 'dark art' and 'bittersweet' - which each reveal different emotions associated with and meanings made of promotions. Our findings contribute theoretically, methodologically and practically to the literature on promotions in elite professional careers in several ways.

First, research has largely presented promotions as objective systems aimed at creating organizational efficiencies (Allen, 1997; Boxall, 1996; Ferris et al., 1992; Takeuchi et al., 2011), while individuals have been described as strategic and rational career actors (e.g. King, 2004). In contrast, the findings of this study suggest that promotions are constructed through individuals' lived emotional experiences which inform their meaning making of the new role. This was particularly apparent when comparing the accounts of decision-makers and promotion candidates. Decision-makers did not experience going through the process first hand; their accounts were detached. They uniformly emphasized the meaning of promotions in relation to objective criteria of career success such as increase in status and financial benefits (Barley, 1989; Hughes, 1937). In contrast, the lived accounts of promotion candidates captured a broad range of emotions associated with promotion and meanings made of the new role. 'Walk in the park' narratives described promotions as generally positive experiences. Lawyers who adopted

these narratives felt optimistic about their new role and they were ready to move on with their careers. In ‘dark art’ narratives, lawyers expressed their struggles with getting promoted due to the political nature which left them feeling angry and frustrated. However, once successfully achieved, being promoted had deeper meanings – they talked about partnership with warmth and pride, and how they used the title to contribute to the firm in a broader sense beyond their personal career ambitions. Third, ‘bittersweet’ narratives were stories of anxiety and exhaustion, associated with perceptions of personal inadequacy in comparison to the ideal partnership candidate and the extensive length of the promotion process. These lawyers felt ambiguous about their new role, even following promotion. Rather than privileging objective and rational accounts of promotions, we therefore argue that it is more meaningful to view promotions through career individuals’ lived emotional experiences of promotions and consider how these experiences influence their subjective meaning making.

Importantly, this also has implications for research on professional career transitions suggesting that promotions give impetus for identity change (Ibarra, 1997; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Louis, 1980). In contrast to this literature, we argue that being promoted does not necessarily lead to the adaption of new professional identities as participants’ lingering feelings of ambiguity made it difficult for them to create meaning in their new role, particularly evident in ‘bittersweet’ narratives. Wittman (2018) suggests that instances of identity lingering are more likely to occur during role changes in discontinuous careers and are less frequent in traditional careers as these are well-structured and irreversible. Our findings add to this by showing that even in highly socialized contexts, such as elite professional careers, people can experience difficulties in adopting to new roles. They reveal that in these careers, strongly idealized, homogenous images may cause experiences of discrepancy that are difficult to overcome. Instead of ‘moving on’, individuals may thus remain ‘stuck’ in what they perceive they are not (Higgins, 1987).

Second, our study challenges the dominant assumption that promotions are positive career experiences linked to notions of career success (Arthur et al., 2005; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Heslin, 2005). Instead, it highlights the contradictory realities of promotion processes and shifts the attention to promotions as potentially negative career events (Baruch & Vardi, 2016). We suggest that this is also because promotion processes are situated in socio-emotional contexts where objectivity and rationality may be aspirational but are rarely accomplished in practice. For decision-makers, it was important to construct a process that seemed rational and transparent in order to sustain their own professional roles as objective and unemotional bystanders. This marked a shift in the relationship between senior partners and promotion candidates who felt unsupported, confused and anxious, illustrated most vividly by the missing footsteps in Matthew's drawing. Further, by constructing career ladders that appeared clearly structured, decision-makers created an illusion of security, overshadowing the fact that promotions are inherently insecure; only a small number of people will be promoted, while the majority will at some point 'fall off'. Similarly, even though 'walk in the park' narratives seemed to support a more strategic career self-management perspective where individuals felt in control of their career development (e.g. King, 2004), they can also be interpreted as ways of coping with the strenuous nature of the promotion process and the anticipated sense of failure if unsuccessful. This was evident in Kate's drawing of a large green 'tick' which she drew rather simplistically and rapidly, almost as an act of avoidance. These findings are important also because they challenge the new careers discourse on protean and intelligent careers (Hall, 2004) by pointing to the career boundaries that may exist as the result of these contradictions and negative experiences (Rodrigues et al., 2016). Yet, other than hindering career development, these negative experiences could also be a source of meaning in people's promotion narratives. Specifically, lawyers who felt that they had been able to overcome these adversities by being resilient felt worthy of the new role.

Extant literature argues that through promotion systems, organizations create and communicate idealized images of successful candidates with the aim to motivate people and reduce the risk of appointing the ‘wrong’ person (Peter & Hull, 1969; Romaine, 2014). On one level, we may argue that the partner promotion system we investigated worked as a selection mechanism because it differentiated those who were ‘right’ and ready for promotion, i.e. who fitted with the prescribed promotion criteria, from those who still needed to work on their promotional selves by for example aligning themselves to the existing partnership. As such, the promotion system was not “useless” (Romaine, 2014:410), but worked effectively. However, we cannot ignore the harmful effects particularly for those who have internalized promotion criteria and expectations and feel a continued sense of not being able to live up to them. Further, the findings suggest that the more professionals tried to align themselves to the promotional ideal, the less space they had for critical reflection on their career choices and claim agency in their career actions. We therefore argue that the effectiveness of an organisation’s promotion system needs to be judged also in the context of the emotions it evokes.

Third, by combining verbal text and drawings, we make a methodological contribution moving away from the dominance of positivistic methodology and quantitative approaches and hence diversifying the existing toolkit of promotions and professions scholarship (Harley, 2015; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009). Specifically, drawing their experiences helped participants *generate new meanings*. Lawyers are expected to be confident and in control, often influenced by their need to provide knowledgeable advice to their clients in challenging situations. Through the act of drawing, they were able to momentarily set aside these qualities by communicating in a different mode. The use of visual methods also allowed us to *accentuate different aspects* of promotions. Specifically, they brought emotional experiences to the foreground and illustrated how promotion candidates felt during this critical career episode.

They also emphasized how professional images are induced by emotions. This opened our analysis to the wider aspects of promotions and uncovered a different reality. Finally, capturing promotion candidates' experiences visually allowed us to *visualize contradictions* in promotions, which so far have been presented as unambiguous career events. This was evident in Clara's picture, which showed both her exhaustion and her happiness. Importantly, in drawings, these contradictions did not need to be resolved. Instead, presenting them visually allowed participants to represent and stay with their experience in the moment.

Practical implications, limitations, and future directions for research

Our study has several practical implications. Our analysis points in particular to the emotionally strenuous and exhaustive nature of promotion processes. As such, it enables a different way of reflecting and talking about promotions which moves away from promotion criteria, frameworks and gatekeepers to recognizing the emotions experienced by promotion candidates and how this might affect their ability to enact the new role. This is important because it may lead organizational decision-makers to develop a more supportive process, design more effective feedback mechanisms particularly in cases of unsuccessful promotions and provide resources post-promotion as candidates transition into the new role, such as coaching experts. Reflecting on and talking about their experiences in this way may also help promotion candidates to become more aware of the emotions they experience as part of their promotion journeys and develop their coping skills particularly given the uncertainty surrounding these critical career events.

One of the boundary conditions of our study is its empirical focus on one profession. Our aim is not to claim the generalizability of our findings but to show how promotions are experienced; nonetheless, there are parallels to other professional organizations, such as accounting firms, consultancies, or universities, as well as larger bureaucratic organizations where promotions are also pertinent. However, in the latter, the attributed meaning may differ.

For example, we may not expect the title of senior manager to hold the same significance as that of partner. Hence, it would be informative to conduct research to address potential variances in other organizations or professional fields. In addition, we did not emphasize gender dynamics. The ‘bittersweet narrative’ was mainly shared by female lawyers, which may point to the gendered nature of promotion processes. Future research may hence consider focusing particularly on women’s experiences of promotions. Finally, while some of our participants underwent several rounds before they were promoted, our sample consisted only of people who were successful. Future research could also investigate the experiences of those who were unsuccessful to complement the existing understanding.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated professionals’ experiences of promotions in elite careers, specifically the promotion to partnership in law firms. Drawing on a narrative approach, combining both spoken and visual accounts of decision-makers, and promotion candidates, we showed how promotions are constituted through people’s lived emotional experiences which inform their subjective meaning making of the new role. The insights offer a more complete and fine-grained description of promotions as critical career events illustrating how promotion processes are entangled with emotions and contradictions. Promotions, we have argued, cannot be understood only as objectively operating systems, that establish fit between organization and individual, nor should professionals only be viewed as strategic and instrumental career actors. Rather, promotions need to be understood through the emotional experiences of individuals while promotion decisions need to be viewed as situated in socio-emotional contexts. Such insights are important for organizational leaders and HR managers who design promotion systems that are supportive, make transparent promotion decisions and prepare promotion candidates for new roles. We also proposed that promotions, even to high status roles, are not necessarily positive career events or periods of career transition, but can be

contradictory and a source of negative experiences particularly for those who feel a lack of support or agency in the process. These insights are likely to be important to both, professionals embarking on their career journeys and scholars researching promotions in elite careers.

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Stefanie Gustafsson is an Lecturer in Organisation Studies at the University of Bath, School of Management. She also holds an Honorary Visiting Position at Cass Business School. Her research investigates professionals' work and career experiences in a changing world of work, trust in organizations and qualitative, multimodal methods. Her current work focuses on the experiences of paraprofessionals, particularly paralegals in law firms. Her work has been published in Organization Studies and the Journal of Vocational Behavior. She has also co-authored a leading book on Exploring Strategic Change.

Juani Swart is a Professor in Human Capital Management at the School of Management, University of Bath. She seeks to understand the nature of contemporary work contexts. In particular, she is interested in cross-boundary working (which includes gig-working and artificial intelligence), its impact on commitment and knowledge sharing. Her research is focused on human capital as a strategic resource, innovation, ambidexterity and employee attitudes and behaviours. She has published widely in journals such as Human Resource

Management, Human Resource Management Journal, Organization Studies and the Journal of Management Studies.